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SUBJECT: KAMERHE DEFIES KABILA; TO PUT QUESTION OF RESIGNATION TO
PARLIAMENTARY LEADERSHIP

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Amid great speculation he would announce his resignation, National Assembly President Vital Kamerhe delivered the keynote speech at the March 16 ceremony opening of the spring session of the national legislature. Kamerhe said he was unwilling to step down without referring the question of his resignation to a vote by parliamentary committee chairmen and caucus leaders in accordance with the National Assembly's by-laws. He reviewed the previous session's accomplishments, noted the importance of the role of women in DRC public life and saluted the recent victory of the DRC national soccer team at an Africa-wide tournament. He also called on the government to release human rights and pro-democracy activists arrested just before the opening of parliament, apparently in a pre-emptive move to prevent them from organizing pro-Kamerhe demonstrations. But no major protests were reported in connection with the opening of the National Assembly, despite persistent rumors students and labor groups would take to the streets against an alleged government plan to force Kamerhe to step down. The ceremony was not covered by the press as the government imposed a media black-out, apparently to prevent Kamerhe from using the event as a national platform to make his case against President Joseph Kabila. The power struggle between the two men over control of the National Assembly could end later in the week when a no-confidence vote will likely be held; their rivalry, however, will continue. End Summary.

¶2. (U) National Assembly President Vital Kamerhe delivered on March 16 a much-anticipated speech at the opening of the national legislature's spring session. The event was boycotted by most Assembly members (we estimate 150-200 deputies of a total of 500 were present) pursuant to instructions from the majority coalition (of which Kamerhe is a member), that they boycott the event to snub Kamerhe over his unwillingness to resign under pressure from President Joseph Kabila. (Note: Four of five members of the Assembly's Executive Bureau resigned under pressure in the past two weeks. End note.) Also absent were Prime Minister Adolphe Muzito and the three deputy Prime Ministers. Attendance by members of the Diplomatic Corps was high.

No resignation without consultation

¶3. (U) Approximately halfway through the 45-minute speech, Kamerhe revealed his immediate plans regarding his status as President of the Assembly. He said he would submit the question of his resignation to the next meeting of the "Conference of Chairmen" in the National Assembly, for discussion and debate in a plenary session. The Conference of Chairmen ("Conference des Presidents" in French) is composed of the members of the Executive Bureau of the National Assembly, the presidents of the seven standing parliamentary commissions, the president of the Commission of Elders ("Comite des Sages"), and the chairs of the eleven parliamentary caucuses.

¶4. (U) Kamerhe began the speech with a review of the September 2008

regular and January 2009 extraordinary sessions. He noted the passage of the 2009 budget and of a law protecting the rights of children, as well as the exercise of parliamentary oversight through the questioning of ministers and recommendations submitted to the Prime Minister. He said the assembly petition circulated in January for an extraordinary session to address the joint Rwandan-DRC anti-FDLR operations was not initiated at his request and was not addressed to President Kabila but to Prime Minister Muzito. He asked rhetorically what collective transgressions the other members of the bureau must have committed to provoke their sequential resignation. Throughout the speech, Kamerhe referred to his support for a rapprochement with Rwanda and the primacy of the preservation of democratic principles and adherence to the Constitution.

15. (SBU) Kamerhe closed his speech, which was interrupted several times by applause, by noting the important role of the Assembly in promoting the protection of women's rights and increased female representation in public office. He also saluted the national soccer team for its March 8 victory at the Africa Nations Championship in Abidjan. His final remarks called for the release of human rights and pro-democracy activists who were recently detained.

Human rights activists arrested

16. (SBU) Kamerhe was clearly referring to several arrests over the previous weekend. According to the National Network of Human Rights NGOs (RENADHOC), on March 15 police arrested "Voix des Sans Voix" (VSV) Executive Director Floribert Chebeya Bahizire, VSV Deputy Executive Director Dolly Inefo Mbunga, and RENADHOC Reception

KINSHASA 00000245 002 OF 002

Director Donat Tshikaya during a press conference. The police reportedly beat and arrested the activists as they announced plans for a march on Parliament in support of Kamerhe. According to one report, the activists were planning to wage an illegal sit-in at the National Assembly. Following the arrests, the police allegedly locked the remaining NGO's and journalists in the meeting room as they ransacked the RENADHOC offices and seized computers, supplies, and a camera from a private TV station. On March 14 the police arrested three student leaders for their planned participation in the protests. The arrests were apparently carried out in a pre-emptive effort to prevent the activists from leading pro-Kamerhe demonstrations.

17. (SBU) Georges Kapiamba, President of the local NGO African Association of Human Rights (ASADHO), told emboff March 16 that he had given interviews to several international news agencies and that ASADHO has issued a press release condemning the arrests and demanding that the activists be released immediately.

Media black-out; no violence reported

18. (SBU) In a surprise move early in the morning of March 16 the government decided to prevent live television and radio coverage of the event. The media blackout was apparently designed to prevent giving Kamerhe a national stage to deliver what many thought would be a defiant anti-Kabila speech.

19. (SBU) No incidents of violence were reported in connection with the opening of parliament. Rumors were rampant in recent days that mass demonstrations would be held to protest an alleged plan by the government to force Kamerhe to resign. Some observers predicted the demonstrations would turn violent. The absence of demonstrations was due to the pre-emptive detention of would-be agitators and also to a massive police presence throughout Kinshasa.

110. (SBU) Comment: Today's events were mostly an anti-climax; little, if any, progress was made in resolving the Kabila-Kamerhe power struggle. On the bright side, however, both protagonists demonstrated restraint and violence was avoided, although the government overreached by arresting activists and imposing a media black-out. The immediate cause of contention between them could be resolved this week when a vote of no-confidence is held, with the

likely outcome that Kamerhe loses. But their rivalry will not end any time soon. One wonders if the next phase will be an intense, protracted confrontation a la Madagascar, or a softer form of competition, perhaps with Kamerhe leaving the scene for a sabbatical abroad. End comment.

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